

Benin Farmers Learn Sunflowers Can Replace Cotton Crops

COTONOU, Benin—The price of cotton—a mainstay of the economy of Benin—fluctuates so widely that low prices either hurt farmers or high prices cause shortages of cottonseed for local oil processors. To address this problem, USAID is working with a private company and an NGO to introduce sunflowers as a new crop.

Fludor, a company specializing in edible oils, will invest \$838,000 to re-equip its cottonseed plant in Benin to process sunflower oil for the local market.

USAID has granted Enterprise Works Worldwide \$320,000 to teach farmers how to grow sunflowers.

Each participating farmer will pledge \$120 to purchase inputs such as seed and fertilizer. Fludor will finance the inputs up front, and promises to buy the farmers' harvests for up to three years. This represents almost a 1:4 leverage of USAID funds.

Seeds will be checked by Enterprise Works Worldwide for oil content, proportion of damaged seeds, and other attributes.

Farmers will have the opportunity to learn how to use mechanical presses that Enterprise Works Worldwide will offer for sale to make sunflower oil.

Beekeeping is another spinoff possibility for farmers. Bees attracted to sunflowers make flavorful honey.

The goal is to cultivate 2,500 hectares with sunflowers by 2006. Assuming average production of 1,000 kilograms per hectare, seed production would total 3,750 tons.

Fludor estimates that processing this

amount of seeds would be profitable. Once domestic production reaches 3,750 tons of sunflower seeds, Fludor will reequip its plant.

Enterprise Works Worldwide tested several sunflower varieties in the Atacora Department in northern Benin in 2000 and 2001. The results of tests were good, with the yield per acre averaging 1,283 kilograms. When Enterprise Works sold the sunflower oil on the local market, consumers liked it and were willing to pay the same price they do for other vegetable oils.

Farmers are very interested in growing something other than cotton. For most, cotton is a losing proposition, even when the cost of family labor is not included in the calculation. Farmers keep growing it because it is their only source of cash income.

As a crop, sunflowers offer several advantages. Unlike cotton cultivation, which is hard on soils, the plowed under remains of sunflower crops improve the soil.

Sunflower seed oil is high quality and low in saturated fats. Sunflower seedcake, a byproduct of industrial oil processing, is high in protein and a good source of animal feed.

"This private-public partnership is truly a win-win situation: a win for farmers willing to take a chance on a new crop and a win for Fludor, which can count on getting the raw material it needs. And it's a win for the environment," said Barbara Dickerson, USAID/Benin's program officer. ★

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